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THE DEVELOPMENT OF PAUL'S BELIEF.

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It is natural to suppose that Paul's conceptions of Christian truth broadened and deepened as the years passed, and that this development left traces on the letters which bear his name. It is altogether probable that, if we had a series of letters covering the long interval of some seventeen years between Paul's conversion and the composition of his earliest extant writing, this development would be far more manifest.

Revelation is gradual to the individual and to the world. Some things we cannot bear to-day, which further experience of life and of God's grace will fit us to bear and understand. Through the whole course of Bible history there is a gradual unfolding of truth. So it is also in the case of the individual. Moses on Mt. Nebo was no longer the Moses who had stood on Mt. Sinai. Paul writing to the Thessalonians was not wholly the same channel for divine communications that he was when he wrote for the last time from the Roman prison. Far from being hostile to the inspiration of Paul's writings, the theory that his views underwent change, from the less clear and less broad to the clearer and broader, is rather confirmatory of the claim to inspiration. For inspiration is through life, and according to the laws of life. It is not the imposition *upon* a soul of a mass of truth, but rather the utterance *in* a soul of that which its own nature and education and longing fit it to hear and to receive.

What Paul's development was between his conversion and the date of his first letter is almost wholly a matter of conjecture. He disappears from our view for the three years immediately following his conversion,—a time when marked development was not improbable. Exactly where he was at this time, or what he did, or how his Christian knowledge grew, we have no data for determining. Dr. Matheson thinks that Paul learned in Arabia the impossibility of being

justified by law, and that he found relief by going back to the covenant with Abraham. But this is scarcely made plausible by the arguments advanced.

Nor is anything known of Paul's life in the four years subsequent to his sojourn in Arabia which can serve as a landmark of development. What his views and occupation were in the years between his brief stay in Jerusalem and his work in Antioch with Barnabas, he does not say. Gal. 5 : 11, "If I *yet* preach circumcision," etc., cannot be regarded as lending support to the view that Paul at this stage of his Christian life held the necessity of circumcision. If he had preached circumcision for three years, and then, a decade later, in the same region, had been an uncompromising opponent of circumcision, it is difficult to believe that we should have no unmistakable traces of the fact. The words in Galatians must be regarded as a designation of his teaching before Christ appeared to him.

The brief data of the next few years, which give glimpses of Paul's course until he reached Corinth, where his first epistles were written, touch in a general way the fundamental truths of his teaching. At Philippi, Thessalonica, and Athens he preached Jesus and the resurrection. And what he said to the philosophers on the Areopagus accords with the teaching in Romans and in the latest epistles. He told them that God had made a revelation to the Gentiles with the desire that they should find Him. The Gentiles are His offspring no less than the Jews. Their times of ignorance God has overlooked, but now He commands them to repent. These points of his Athenian discourse tally precisely with his later teaching. In the Epistle to the Romans, for example, written some six years after the discourse in Athens, we have the famous passage on natural religion (Rom. 2 : 18-23). But the catholic ideas here expressed, the recognition of a universal revelation by which all men *may* attain unto salvation, and the recognition of the universal authority of conscience,—these are continued also in the Athenian discourse.

There is, however, one point in which Paul's view at this time seems to have been different from that of later years.

He delivered to the churches which he had established on his first missionary journey the decrees of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 16 : 4). One of these decrees was that the converts should abstain from things sacrificed to idols. Now if the historian of Acts is right, and if Paul did lay this injunction upon the churches as an important rule of life, then he plainly taught differently a few years later, when he wrote to the Corinthians and the Romans. His language to the former is, "Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, eat, asking no questions for conscience sake. . . . But if any man say to you, This hath been offered in sacrifice, eat not, for his sake that showed thee, and for conscience sake: conscience, I say, *not thine own*, but the others" (1 Cor. 10 : 25-29). In other words, the Christian may unhesitatingly eat of meat that has been offered to idols. Only he is to abstain when by eating he might wound another's conscience. The rule is to eat; the exception, to abstain. But according to the decrees of the Council, the invariable rule was to abstain. Here, therefore, Paul's view seems to have undergone an important change in the direction of Christian liberty.

In the period covered by the epistles of Paul very few changes of belief can be safely affirmed. Evidence is wanting that his conception of Christ's work, of man's need, or of the way of salvation, experienced any essential development. Plainly we have no right to infer, with Weiss, that, because little is said in the Thessalonian Epistles about the earthly work of Christ, therefore Paul in his preaching at that time laid little stress upon it. We must not assume that Paul in a particular letter gives us all his belief in regard to the essential doctrines of Christianity, or in regard to any one of these doctrines. The argument from silence must be used with great care. In like manner it is unsafe to infer that because Paul speaks, in the Thessalonian Epistles, of the resurrection as an event, and speaks of it as a process in Romans, therefore his view was essentially changed in the meantime. For who can say that, because Paul does not allude to the resurrection as a spiritual process, in Thessalonians, he therefore did not yet hold such a view? On the other hand, in those epistles where he does dwell upon the resurrection as a pres-

ent process, he does not cease to think of it also as a future event.

Without denying that there may be some other points in which development is fairly traceable, it may be quite positively held that Paul's view of the Parousia did change between the composition of the Thessalonians and the end of his life. When he wrote to the Thessalonians, he thought the Parousia might occur within his own life-time (1 Thess. 3 : 13; 4 : 13-18; 2 Thess. 2 : 6, 7). When he wrote the Pastoral Epistles, he had given up the hope of living to witness the Parousia (1 Tim. 6 : 14; 2 Tim. 4 : 1, 6-8). His younger fellow-laborer, Timothy, might live till Christ's coming, but for himself the time of his departure was at hand. The brightness of his early hope had become dim. That great event on which his thought dwelt so much when he was in Thessalonica had receded not a little into the future. But it must be clearly noted that the one point in which change can be definitely registered is the point of time. Paul still believed in the Parousia, and believed that it had an important bearing on the Christian life. It is not only in the Thessalonian Epistles that he makes large practical use of the Parousia, following the example of Christ (Matt. 24 : 37-42), but also in the Philippians (3 : 20) and in the Pastoral Epistles (Tit. 2 : 8; 2 Tim. 4 : 8). But as regards the time of the Parousia he had been compelled to alter his view. We may go somewhat further than this. From a comparison of the Thessalonians with the Pastoral Epistles, it seems fair to infer that at the earlier date the Apostle was much more concerned with the future than he was at the later date. Of course this was natural. Present things would grow in importance as the Parousia receded into the background. In the letters to the Thessalonians the Parousia controls everything, in the Pastoral Epistles it is barely alluded to. It is hidden, as it were, behind the urgent matters of the present day.

Paul's view regarding the nearness of the Parousia was not different from that which was held by other New Testament writers; and the change that came over his view must apparently have been a common change, for the men of that gen-

eration, one after another, died without seeing the day which they had longed to see.

On this question of the Parousia, therefore, the epistles of Paul plainly show development, but a parallel case can scarcely be found. Paul was mature when converted, and had been a Christian some sixteen or seventeen years when he composed the first of his extant letters. And the larger part of this long period had been spent in active Christian work, which had brought him into contact with all classes of men and with all the questions of the time. It is natural, therefore, to believe his doctrines were clearly and firmly held, when, at last, in the providence of God, he began to express them in written form.